

HUMAN TRAFFICKING AWARENESS MONTH

By Erica Reynoso, PhD, LCSW, Transition Age Youth System of Care Bureau



In recognition of January as Human Trafficking Awareness month, I would like to take this opportunity to share some very important facts and information about this growing and atrocious problem. Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, or CSEC as it is commonly known, is a specific type of human trafficking. It is a horrific societal problem that affects our children, families and communities on a local, national and international level. CSEC is sexual abuse of a minor for economic gain — **it is child abuse**. It takes many forms, including child prostitution, pornography, and trafficking in children.

Los Angeles' county and city leaders and agencies have helped increase awareness about this problem and are working to combat it. The aim is to one day rid our communities of this child abuse and type of modern-day slavery. Our LACDMH community is making positive contributions to combatting CSEC. LACDMH has partnered with various agencies to participate in countywide efforts and protocols for combatting this problem, with the aim of providing quality services to the victims of CSEC. But first, our LACDMH community must be copiously aware of this problem and have adequate training to best serve these children and youth.

Starting in February, our department will move forward with a training plan for more than 500 providers. In addition, prevention, identification, assessment and treatment strategies are in development to enhance services for this extremely vulnerable population.

Here are a few key points about CSEC that you should know:

- ♦ ALL children (girls, boys, transgendered youth) may be targeted and exploited and may fall victim to prostitution.
- ♦ Risk Factors:
 - Age; Average age is 12-14 years old
 - History of Abuse; Physical, Sexual, Emotional and Neglect
 - Runaway (History)/Homelessness
 - History of Involvement with Child Protective Services
 - Parental Drug Use/Abuse
 - Having Older Boyfriends/Girlfriends

- ♦ Survival sex is when minors exchange sexual acts for survival needs, such as housing, food and clothing. It is noted that **30%** of youth who live in shelters and **70%** of youth living on the streets are victims of commercial sexual exploitation¹.
- ♦ Children and youth who are exploited are generally targeted, groomed, brainwashed and conned by predators (traffickers) to enter the life. The trafficker initially begins by playing on the child's vulnerabilities, giving her/him a false sense of security and "love" or may keep her/him from leaving through means of violence, sexual assaults, and threats to the child or to their loved ones. Consequently, the victim may incur months and years of horrific abuse and violence during their victimization in the commercial market. These victims can experience life-long challenges, such as²:
 - Physical and mental health problems, which often compound all other challenges
 - Lowered self-esteem (often resulting in not feeling they deserve love and respect)
 - Decreased ability to build and sustain trusting relationships
 - Decreased ability to understand and enforce personal (and healthy) boundaries
 - Trauma bonding (this is an emotional survival bond with the exploiter)
 - Substance use/abuse
 - Social stigma
 - Threats, violence and psychological manipulation (i.e., brainwashing)
 - Academic and vocational disruptions
 - Legal problems/multiple interactions with the legal system

Remember January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month—please help **RAISE AWARENESS** this month about CSEC! Everyone in the community is affected by this terrible crime – some more directly than others. Let's get the word out that OUR CHILDREN ARE NOT FOR SALE and let's get EDUCATED and assist in educating those around us.

An important part of taking action against CSEC is reframing perceptions about its victims and fighting the stigma that surrounds this issue. For example, children and youth who have been prostituted and exploited are often regarded as "child or teen prostitutes" by the public and authorities with whom they come in contact with. However, given the few choices some youth have, when he/she sells sex at the hands of an exploitative adult, it is largely a means of survival or because the exploiter has greatly invested in exploiting the child's vulnerabilities and doing whatever is necessary to indenture her/him for the advancement of sexual gratification or financial gain.

For further information about this topic or regarding efforts within LACDMH, please email: CSECinfo@dmh.lacounty.gov. Also, for more facts and information, please check out the *DMH Fact Sheet(s)* online: http://file.lacounty.gov/dmh/cms1_211312.pdf

¹ National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: America's Prostituted Children. Washington DC: Shared Hope International, 2009.

² These challenges may also make it difficult for the child/youth to leave the situation